



The Interfaith Youth Movement: Playing to Win

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In the opening sentences to his final sermon, “I See the Promised Land”, Martin Luther King Jr. imagined himself standing at the beginning of time, being asked by the Almighty which era he would most like to live in.

He remembers Egypt, the flight of freedom across the Red Sea, but he says he wouldn’t stop there.

He considers Athens, and wonders what it may have been like to discuss the great ideas with Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. But he chooses to move on.

He plays with being at the side of Abraham Lincoln in 1863, watching him sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

But ultimately, he says to the Almighty: “If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.”

King recognized the irony of his own words. “That’s a strange statement to make,” he said, “because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding – there is something happening in our world.”

I wonder, as Martin Luther King Jr looks down at us from Heaven, if he may not be a little conflicted, a little jealous, if he might not be persuaded to trade some of his time in the second half of the twentieth century for a few days at the dawn of this new Millennium.

In a sermon given just a few days earlier, King opened with Washington Irving’s famous story, “Rip Van Winkle.” It’s a story that most of us are familiar with – a man went up a mountain, fell asleep, woke up twenty years later, and found that he had grown a long beard.

A seemingly minor detail in that story caught King’s eye. When Rip Van Winkle went up the mountain, he passed a sign with a picture of the current leader of America, King George III of England. When he woke up from his sleep and came down the mountain, the sign had a different picture: George Washington. Rip Van Winkle had slept through a great revolution.

King told his audience not to sleep through the great revolution they were witnessing – the revolution of the color line. “The color line” was a phrase coined by the great African American scholar WEB DuBois a hundred years ago.

DuBois famously said that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line.

As King traveled from the American South to the American North, from India to Africa, he witnessed first-hand the revolution of the color line.

The color line, in King's view, did not divide black people from white people, Easterners from Westerners, Americans from Africans. King thought the color line separated two worldviews, two attitudes: those people who wanted to perish together as fools were on one side of the color line, and those who wanted to live together as brothers were on the other side.

The reason I think King may be a little jealous of our time is because we are living through a revolution similar in its scope and intensity: the revolution of the faith line.

Religion was at the heart of both King's personal life and his global vision. He spoke of his Christian faith as a "vocation of sonship and brotherhood" that took him "beyond the calling of race or nation or creed." When King observed that, "We are tied together in a single garment of destiny", he followed it up by saying, "This is the way that God's universe is made."

King also understood that God's universe included people from many different faith backgrounds. His job was to make common cause with them in the pursuit of justice. One of King's closest companions in the Civil Rights Movement was the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. His 20th Century hero was a Hindu from India, Mahatma Gandhi. The man he nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize was the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh.

And while he held deeply to the particulars of his Christian faith, he understood the universals that all faiths share, saying that the "Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality" was that "love was the supreme unifying principle of life."

When King spoke of his vision in the broadest sense, it was about how human beings, created by God, should relate to one another. He called this the World House, stating: "The great new problem of mankind (is that) we have inherited ... a great 'world house' in which we have to live together - black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu ... Because we can never again live apart, we must somehow learn to live with each other in peace."

For King, faith-inspired love was both the blueprint and the foundation of that house.

Contrary to the beliefs of the best sociologists of forty years ago, the vast majority of the world has not gotten less religious as it has modernized, it has gotten more religious. And religion has not faded from the public square, it is dominating the headlines.

As recently as the 1990s, many people considered religion a marginal issue, quirky at best, at worst, ridiculous. In her book The Mighty and the Almighty, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, admitted that the lack of

attention paid to religious issues and communities in her State Department hurt America's diplomatic and peace efforts.

I remember the response that a high school friend gave me when I told him I had started an interfaith youth organization in 1999 – he called me a member of the flat earth society.

These days, nobody thinks religion is marginal.

A key question on the minds of everyone from university presidents to state department officials, from high school students to religious ministers, is this: will the increased frequency and intensity of interactions between people from different religions lead to more conflict or more cooperation? Will the world be a better place as a result of people from different faith backgrounds constantly bumping into one another or a worse place?

The movement we represent stands at the center of that question. It is one of the most important issues facing humankind today. It's the reason that this room is full of some of the best people on earth.

I want to talk about a few of the keys aspects of our work:

The vision. The vision of our movement revolves around how we view the faith line. I think we have to borrow from Martin Luther King Jr's understanding of the color line. In other words, the faith line does not separate Muslim and Christian or Gentile and Jew or Believer and Nonbeliever. The faith line separates people who want to live together as brothers and people who want to perish together as fools. There are Evangelical Christians who want to live together as brothers and sisters, Orthodox Jews who want to live together as brothers and sisters, traditional Muslims who want to live together as brothers and sisters, secular humanists who want to live together as brothers and sisters. All of these groups, and many many more, are on the same side of the faith line.

And because it is religious identity that is particularly at play here, I think it is useful to say that the faith line separates people who believe in religious pluralism and people who are opposed to it. I will articulate a more detailed framework regarding religious pluralism in a minute, but the truth is that it's a fancy term for a simple concept: religious pluralism is the idea that people from different religious perspectives, including none at all, should live together in equal dignity and mutual loyalty. Most of the world wants to live this way. The reason pluralism is in peril is because it is not enough to incline in this direction, you have to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism and make your voice heard, make your actions count, and take a stand. Hence the title of this gathering, "Crossing the Faith Line". It's not enough to point to the side you believe in. In moments like these, you have to cross the line and take a stand.

That is because pluralism has powerful enemies. There are at least three groups who are dead-set against religious pluralism: the aggressively anti-religious, the religious extremists, and the outright bigots. The aggressively anti-religious hate religion, they think that religion poisons everything; the religious extremists hate people, they want only their group to dominate and everyone

else to suffocate (and the truth is, they hate most of the members of their own group too); and the outright bigots hate one religion and one group of people in particular.

The economist Milton Friedman, one of the most influential minds of the twentieth century, once noted: “Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”

The ideas and visions of the aggressively anti-religious, the religious extremists and the outright bigots are extremely powerful. They have best-selling books, highly effective media, and lots of passionate young people involved. They have beaten the drums of war in the past and they are doing it again.

Those of us in the interfaith youth movement have a lot of powerful things on our side. The fabric of the universe, for one. The intentions and inclinations of the vast majority of humanity, for another. A growing movement. “God is willing,” as my friend Mary Abele tells me frequently. But human action – even audacity – is required.

The Framework. If pluralism is what we are focused on, it needs a framework. We get the word from one of our intellectual mentors, Diana Eck, who says that diversity is the fact of people from different backgrounds living in close quarters, while pluralism is positive and intentional engagement with difference. That is a hugely helpful definition, and it has guided the work of the IFYC for several years. I want to offer a broader framework that is inspired by Diana Eck’s definition.

In my view, pluralism has three key components: Identity, relationship, and the common good.

It is a framework that is useful when it comes to individual faith formation: Who am I? How do I relate to you? What can we do together?

It is also a framework that is relevant to campuses, cities and national societies. How can different groups on our campus, in our city, in our nation feel respected? What are the relationships between those groups? What common good are they contributing to together?

A recent article in *Foreign Affairs* noted that the greatest challenge to peace will likely not involve wars between nations and regions, but wars within nations and regions – between groups from different identities who do not feel respected, who are not in positive relationship, who do not agree upon or have a commitment to a common good.

The people most likely to do the fighting, the killing and the dying in those identity-based conflicts are young people. It has been that way in the past, and demographics suggest it is almost sure to be that way in the future. The most religiously volatile parts of the world are also the youngest. Over 50% of India is under 26 years old. The median age in Iraq is under 20.

The work that we in this room do in building pluralism on our campuses, in our communities, through our exchange programs and media and websites, is one of the keys to peace in the 21st century.

Indeed, one mantra of this century may well be: “If you want peace, build pluralism. If you want pluralism, empower young people.”

The Movement. It is imperative that we see what we are doing as more than a set of activities, or a set of programs, or a set of organizations, or a set of individuals. We have to view this as a movement. A movement is a network of individuals and institutions making a vision reality. Environmentalism is a movement. It has a core vision – that the earth is precious and needs to be protected. It has a set of major institutions, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, many more. It has activities ranging from recycling to advocating for global agreements to developing green technologies. It has major media, including an Academy Award winning film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. It has the support of major philanthropic dollars, including many specifically-focused foundation giving programs. Perhaps most of all, environmentalism is an idea in the culture – people have an image and an association when you say “I am part of the environmental movement.”

The interfaith youth movement can be thought of just as broadly as environmentalism or human rights or any other movement. After all, a large percentage of the world is young and religious. How their identities get formed and the ways they interact with each other will shape our century. Our movement needs institutions, it needs voices, it needs activities, it needs university courses, it needs an academic literature, it needs serious media, it needs major funding. For any of those to happen, we need to understand that we are collectively building a movement.

The knowledge base and skill set. There are two areas of knowledge that I think are key for the interfaith youth movement. The first is knowledge of how the best parts of the great traditions of the world – the national, ethnic, racial and especially religious traditions – speak to human pluralism. A key thread in my book *Acts of Faith* is how the three traditions I belong to – America, India and Islam – tell the story of pluralism. In a world where people are saying that the human story is about religious conflict, or the American story does not include Islam, or the Muslim story is about dominating others, we need to have enough knowledge to say “That’s not true”, or at least it’s not the only story. When people tell you the Islam doesn’t belong in America, we have to be able to tell them that Thomas Jefferson owned a Qur’an, that Ben Franklin said the pulpit of a hall he built would be open to a Muslim preacher, that James Madison pointed out that America’s religious freedom depended on its religious diversity, and an important part of that diversity has always been Muslims, especially considering that a significant number of the African slaves brought to this country were Muslims.

The second type of knowledge that I think is crucial to our movement is knowing the shared values between different religions. How do Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and other great traditions ‘speak to’ the shared values of mercy, compassion, dignity, pluralism, and service? What

are the various scriptures that emphasize these values? Who are the heroes in each tradition that embody them?

To be useful, knowledge must be mobilized through a particular skill set. For interfaith youth work, that skill set includes organizing, storytelling and facilitating. In other words, we need to be able to organize people from different faith communities to come together in concrete projects, we need to tell the story of the possibility of human pluralism and we need to be able to facilitate discussions of diverse people sharing how their various traditions call them to work together to serve others.

The strategy. People ask me all the time if we just preach to the choir at the Interfaith Youth Core. We need to break that down into two questions. The first, what are we doing with the audiences that already show up, the proverbial choir? The second, how are we expanding our audience?

I actually like the preacher / choir analogy, and think it illustrates a strategy for building a movement.

The first thing a good preacher does is to preach to the choir an inspirational song, a song that articulates a vision of the world as it could be.

The second thing a preacher does is make sure the choir learns the song – not just hears it, but internalizes it, and sings it to others.

The third thing a good preacher does is train each member of the choir to be a preacher him or herself, and to send those choir members out into the world to start their own choir, to be choir directors.

In other words, the key to our strategy is to convince the existing members of the choir that they are not just participants, but producers. They amplify the sound of the vision, and they expand the audience of the movement.

Next time someone asks you if you are just preaching to the choir, don't treat the question as an insult. Tell that person our choir-based strategy for building the movement.

Back in 1999 when the Interfaith Youth Core was basically a website, a brochure and a dream, I went to the Parliament of the World's Religions in South Africa. I remember watching Mandela come on stage and seeing a man in the audience stand up and begin a sonorous chant. I watched in wonder as Mandela cocked his head to one side and listened and nodded. I remember my friend Anastasia telling me, "That is a Xhosa praise song, sung for the Chief when he comes."

I remember hearing Mandela say that South Africa would not be free if it wasn't for different religious communities working together. I remember reading about how young Mandela was when he started the Youth League of the African National Congress – he was 26 years old, the same age that King was when he led the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

I was 24 years old in that hall, and I felt the electric current of history right there. I remember thinking to myself: “God, I just want to be a part of it, I just want to be in the mix, I just want the chance to engage with some of the great issues of my time, so when my grandchildren ask me “Were you there?” I will be able to say yes. When I look back at my life, I will be able to say, ‘I wasn’t in the stands, I was on the field; I wasn’t a subject, I was a citizen.”

I realize now how naïve I was being. As David Byrne of the Talking Heads used to say: “Watch out, you might get what you’re after.” It’s get on your knees and close your eyes and fold your hands and pray to be part of the great issues of the era, but what happens when you stand up and unfold your hands and open your eyes and find yourself in the room that you asked God to put you in, and you are looking those great issues in the eye, and the heat feels like it’s only going up?

The truth is, we are all right now living through a great revolution. The question is, are we building the world we want to build, or are we forfeiting the world to people with less good intentions.

In the Muslim tradition, we are taught that God created human beings for grand purposes, that we are His Abd and Khalifa, His Servant and Representative on Earth. God did not create the world or humankind in sport. God’s gift to us is to make us a part of the jazz and war of life, in our breath is His breath, with His breath comes our potential, what we make of our potential is our gift to God.

God’s glory on earth is reflected in many ways, and one way is through the actions of humankind.

We were not meant to play small. Five years ago, this same gathering had 40 people. Five years ago, the Days of Interfaith Youth Service were only an idea. Five years ago, if you had said the words “interfaith youth movement” people would have said you read too many comic books.

But here we are, at the center of one of the most important issues of the century.

I want to return for a moment to the sermon that I began with, “I See the Promised Land.” King ended that sermon with some of the most resonant words of the Twentieth Century: “We’ve got some difficult days ahead ... I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

A few hours later, a bullet from the gun of James Earl Ray stamped Martin Luther King Jr’s ticket into the cosmic Promised Land, the place Muslims call Jannah.

I've spent a lot of time reflecting on those last few words of King's final sermon, on what he might have meant by the Promised Land on earth. Why didn't he think he had arrived at that Promised Land when the busses were desegregated in Montgomery in 1956? Or after he won the Nobel Prize and brought international attention to the Civil Rights Movement? Or after major legislation was passed in 1964 and 1965 that finally gave full legal rights for African-Americans?

I think King kept moving because he understood the promised land on earth to be more a direction than a destination, more a process than a place. And I think that's a message to us, hearing those words, forty years later.

During these three days in Chicago, maybe we will glimpse that promised land of human pluralism together. Maybe we will experience, even fleetingly what the World House might feel like. Perhaps we will feel the electric current of history, that something is happening in this world. Who knows what relationships will be built here, what new ideas will be birthed.

It was in this city that the promise of the interfaith movement was first articulated at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, that from now on the great religions of the world would no longer make war on each other, but on the giant ills that afflict humankind.

It was in this city, 70 years later, that a young black Baptist from the American south, the Reverend Martin Luther King, met a senior Jewish figure from Eastern Europe, the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and discovered in their different traditions a shared commitment to common action.

The whole while, let us know the truth of that great poet of Chicago, Gwendolyn Brooks:

*We are each other's business
We are each other's harvest
We are each other's magnitude and bond*